What does it mean to be Free?

II Corinthians 3:1-6; 12-18
Rev. John M. Buchanan
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What does it mean to be free? There is no more important question than that today, or in any age; and the answer depends entirely on who it is who is doing the answering.

A young Marxist might say that to be free means to be rid of capitalism and the whole free-enterprise system. An African might define freedom in terms of the absence of the white man's presence, his institutions and his money. The American ghetto dweller might talk about freedom from the police or slum lords. The middle class merchant might define it as freedom to make a profit: a real estate man - to sell or not to sell to whom he pleases. Certainly the Trustees of Purdue University and the Purdue Peace Union differ when it comes to articulating what it means to be free. So would a plant manager and union steward. So would we all because to this question , as to all others, each of us brings his own personal freight, vested interests, commitments and operating assumptions.

And yet, you and I, ought to be able to express some fundamental unanimity, no matter who we are, or what our vested interests happen to be. Because you and I have voluntarily chosen to place ourselves under the discipline of discipleship to Jesus Christ, and that discipleship may, in fact, be understood almost entirely in terms of freedom.

The question of what it means to be free might be merely philosophical, just an entertaining round of intellectual gymnastics, except for the fact that it is being asked today by all sorts of people and groups of people. The Black Power advocate as well as the member of the John Birch Society; the student revolutionary and young republican: the devout Christian who throws over the Church and his brother who stays in the church - all are asking - "What does it really mean to be free?"

The disturbing thing is that we don't really seem to know, and that fact makes the quest doubly important. We are inclined sometimes to look down our social noses at those involved in the quest. Too often we dismiss an individual and the question he is asking because of his attire, or his beard or the length of his hair. And to the degree we do this, we exhibit our own lack of freedom - our own captivity to certain styles and forms. The quest is on - and we need to be part of it.

What does it mean to be free? One thing it doesn't mean is the complete absence of responsibility in the form of basic rules and regulations. It does not mean to do whatever you feel like doing whenever you feel like doing it. Absolute, philosophic freedom is called anarchy - which in fact has proven to be synonymous with chaos.

It is interesting that there are those who seriously propose this as a working definition of freedom. To effectively espouse their cause, they have an international organization of anarchists, which of course can have no rules or regulations. They met last year in Rome and spent three days arguing and fighting among themselves about who would be the leader. Anarchy just doesn't work. The assumption that men live in some predictable relationship with each other rules out totally any form of absolute freedom. Walter Lippman said it well in his little book, Preface to Morals - "We have come to see that Huxley was right when he said that a man's worst difficultires begin when he is able to do as he likes."

St. Paul said it another way: "For you were called to freedom brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh." (Galatians 5:13) You see the Christian's crow with the anarchist goes far deeper than the mere matter of social efficiency. In anarchy we see an incredibly naive doctrine of man; i.e. that man, if given complete freedom, will on his own account choose to act responsibly. History proves otherwise. Man is a sinner. He doesn't choose to act responsibly. Even when he wants to he doesn't make the grade. Freedom does not mean unbridled behavior. Freedom does not, in any context, mean the right to do whatever you want.

What does the Bible say? About freedom the Bible says quite a bit, and no one says it more eloquently than St. Paul. In the New Testament lesson this morning we heard him responding to the repeated charge that the Gospel he proclaimed was invalid because it was not based on the religious law. Everywhere he went he was followed by zealous Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who taught that to be a true Christian a man must first submit to the moral and relgious code of the Old Testament. Paul had proclaimed a message of freedom. God in Christ had reconciled all men to himself. Men were free - free from the ancient effort to win reconciliation; free from the fear of divine punishment; free from anxiety about death; free to devote all their energies to being the kind of men God wanted them to be. His protagonists, however, took the position that obedience to the law was still necessary - even if it meant less freedom for the individual.

Paul punctuated his argument with the strongest words possible: ". . . the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." And again - "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and when the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (II Corinthians 3)

It is a battle that rages throughout the New Testament, down through the years of Church history, right into the present. Just like those early Christians in Corinth, men have always shown a preference for a religion of restriction rather than freedom. Freedom demands personal initiative, personal integrity, personal decision-making. A religion that finds its essence in a written code demands none of this. It does provide security and safety - but not freedom. And Paul was convinced that - "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

It is imperative, however, that we understand that Paul was no anarchist. He did not equate the Gospel with license to do whatever you want. As a matter of fact, Paul was very realistic about man's ability to cope with freedom. In the text I cited before from his letter to the Galatians, he warned against the abuse of Christian freedom. He knew that men would move out from under slavery to the law - and in the rarified air of freedom, quickly become slaves to something else. Paul called it - "the flesh". We can understand it as simply - the self - the human ego with its incessant demand for attention and gratification. Freedom can become that. Freedom can become the environment for the vilest form of selfishness. Paul knew it and he warned against it.

For the Christian, however, Jesus Christ took the place of the law. Instead of obeying a written code the believer was called to follow Christ, to do his will, to become as much like him as possible. Is that absolute freedom? It depends. It is not the right to do anything. It is, for the Christian, the act of liberation that finally and only allows him to become what he was created to be - a loving, serving, caring brother to all men.

That, very briefly, is theNew Testament on Freedom. And from that point we can begin to answer, from a Christian vantage, the question "What does it mean to be free?"

I would begin with the church itself. When I say the Church, I mean, of course, the universal Christian Church in all its expressions. But let us not be guilty of excluding from that mystical universal body the Church as we know it best - here in the life of this congregation. If the gospel is a word of freedom, then the church ought to be supremely the one institution in society where men are free. Collectively free - the Church itself ought to be free withinsociety to be itself. But it is not, and if you think it is, you're not thinking very well.

On the contrary, the Church has allowed itself to become captive to the culture in which it find itself: that culture being overwhelmingly white and middle class. In his excellent book the Suburban Captivity of the Churches, Gibson Winter discusses the exodus of main-line Protestantism from the Ghettoes, and then issues a very ominous warning. The Church in North Africa, he points out, lived for several hundred years. And then it disappeared without a trace. "This collapse can certainly be attributed in part to the expansion of Islam; however, the core of the problem was the identification of North African Christianity with the upper social classes. The Churches became centers of upper-class culture; consequently they lacked widespread support among the people. When Islam swept across North Africa it erased Christianity. Where Christianity has become identified with upper class elites, it has lacked a substantial base in the working population and has been unable to weather social change." (p.50)

It happened a thousand year ago, because Christianity in the Church was captive to one class. It happened in Cuba, and today is heppening all over Latin America. The Church is so completely identified with and dependent upon the wealthy land-owning class that it has become almost totally estranged from the great mass of people.

Can it happen here? I would suggest that it already has. The Church is not free to be itself - consequently it has very little to say to anyone but white, middle class people. The ghettoes just aren't listening any more.

Where, for instance, did we ever get the idea that the success of a church could be measured in terms of its statistical and financial size? We got the idea, of course, from American middle class culture, which puts a great premium on statistical and financial strength. That cultural value - has become an ecclesiastical goal, and to the degree the Church reaches for it, it is just as much a captive as it would be if the government forcibly closed all its doors.

In Jesus Christ the church is free. It is free to be the kind of institution he called it to be - loving, serving, helping, healing. It doesn't have to worry about survival - God will take care of that. It has to worry only about being what Christ called it to be. If only we could understand that about ourselves: if only we could see that we are called together not to be successful - but to be faithful - if only we could exercise the freedom God gives us.

What does it mean to be free? We began with that question, and now I would pose it personally. What does it (or could it) mean to you and me to be free?

You know, I think somewhere in the back of our minds we know, or at least we have some image - some hint. I think our over-reaction to the

hippies is germinated by our knowledge of the fact that we are not free. I think the image of a man acting completely freely irritates us because we know we are not free. Don't misunderstand. This is not to condone the excesses of the hippie movement; it is not to suggest that we drop out of society and use four letter words because that seems to be freedom. It is not. But I still contend that our anger is fuelled by the fact that we are not free - not free to do what we want - what we ought - what we know we should do.

What prisons have we chosen? Some choose alcohol or drugs. Some choose sexual promiscuity. Some see the whole world through the spectacles of the middle class. Some see men of another skin as their inferiors. Some see through Catholic, or Protestant or Presbyterian glasses. They are all prisons.

Some choose the prison of financial security. Others choose vocational success, and are willing to sacrifice anything to secure it. How many homes are destroyed because of that prison? How often has love died because someone was in bonded servitude to the company? There are others - I could go on.

But in the final analysis we choose. We choose our prison. Or we may choose to be free. The decision is ours. One philosopher said it this way: "We are finally free only to choose our master."

Christian faith suggests that the choice is all important. St. Paul suggests that if Jesus Christ is master - freedom is born. We are free to choose him, and the promise is that in choosing him, we are free in a way impossible without him.

What does it mean to be free? Why not be free and find out? For "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

Amen.